

# **Classroom Innovation: *Teachers Create New Methods***

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Do standards and test-based accountability limit teachers' creativity? That is a central question being asked around the country of programs such as Virginia's Standards of Learning, a question that will become more salient with the passage of the federal law known as the Leave No Child Behind Act, which will require annual tests in grades 3-8 in reading and math.

As an elementary-school principal and former second-grade classroom teacher who works daily with the Virginia SOLs, I can assure parents and others that creativity is flourishing in our schools as more and more educators come to realize that standards, accountability and creativity go together. There is no reason whatsoever that teachers cannot use creative and fun teaching practices with their schoolchildren while teaching the children the knowledge and skills necessary to enable our kids to pass the SOL tests.

In fact, the evidence across Virginia shows that creative teaching practices and success on the SOL tests increasingly occur simultaneously.

## **Creative Teachers Succeed**

Creative teachers who engage their classes with lessons and experiences that cover the content in the standards in fun and entertaining ways are seeing their students succeed on the SOL tests. Virginia's natural and historical attractions and museums are reporting record levels of visitation from school groups. The difference is that activities and field trips today are focused on supporting the acquisition of the knowledge and skills specified in the standards.

There are numerous examples around the state of the creative ways teachers are teaching the SOLs. At Chancellor Middle School in Spotsylvania County, students create power-point presentations on the major battles and leaders of the Civil War. They also create edible maps of the union as they learn how the issues of slavery and states rights rent the nation. Last year the school's pass rate in history exceeded the progress benchmark for 2001 by seven points.

In Fairfax County ninth-graders from Westfield High School studying Homer team with third-graders from a nearby elementary school for skits and other activities focused on the history and culture of ancient Greece and Rome. Last spring more than 90 percent of the ninth-graders passed the World History I SOL test; the third-graders from Deer Park Elementary School did just as well on their SOL test in history.

In Lynchburg, students from Sandusky Middle School make regular trips to the banks of Burton Creek. They conduct tests to monitor the health of the stream and in the process learn about watersheds and other concepts contained in the eighth-grade science SOL. Last year more than 75 percent of Sandusky's eighth-graders passed their science SOL test.

## **History Set to Music**

Through the eight regional Governor's Best Practice Centers, the Virginia Department of Education encourages the use of creative and effective teaching strategies and lesson plans, such as those mentioned above, that lead to increases in student achievement.

It is not a coincidence that as student achievement on the SOL tests and other measures of learning has soared, complaints about "teaching to the test" and "one-size-fits-all education" have decreased. A poll conducted last year by the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute of Virginia Commonwealth University indicates that more is at work here than a grudging acceptance of the adage that you can't argue with success.

More than half of the respondents (52 percent) agreed that the Standards of Learning have helped Virginia's schools. The percentage of parents with children in public schools who felt this way was much larger, with 62 percent agreeing that the commonwealth's schools are better because of the SOL. Support for the SOL was stronger among respondents who identified themselves as Democrats (54 percent) than Republicans (49 percent). Support for the standards among African-Americans (60 percent) was greater than among whites (50 percent).

## **Tests Also Identify Need**

Most school divisions have moved beyond the awkwardness that accompanied the introduction of SOL testing. Test results now are seen not just as a measure of success or failure, but also as a tool to identify children who need help. And because of accountability, more children who need assistance are getting it.

Most importantly, our children are learning more. They are better writers and readers, they are getting better at math, and they know more about their physical world and the history of their state and nation.

Our children are learning more because teachers throughout our public schools are working very hard and using best teaching practices, practices that are creative, entertaining – and effective. They are proving every day that high standards, accountability, and teacher creativity go together.

*(Susan Noble, an elementary-school principal, is a member of the State Board of Education)*

